



SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF YOLO

PRESS RELEASE

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JURY SERVICE DURING A PANDEMIC

After a one-month pause in response to the Omicron surge, jury trials in Yolo County are set to resume on February 7th. You might ask: should we really have jury trials during a pandemic? The answer is that our justice system provides an essential service, and it can't stop working, even in a pandemic.

When COVID-19 hit, the Yolo Superior Court pivoted to remote appearance (Zoom Court) for most court hearings. The technology allowed us to keep our court working without endangering public health. Remote appearance has been a tremendous success – it has proven popular with judges, lawyers, litigants, witnesses, and court observers, and the Yolo Court plans to keep it as an option even when the pandemic ends.

But jury trials must be conducted in-person, and for most of the pandemic, we have continued to summon jurors and hold trials. Jury trials can't wait until the pandemic ends – the accused have speedy trial rights, victims need closure, civil litigants must have their day in court, and cases must be heard while memories are fresh and witnesses are available. Jury trials must continue, perhaps with the occasional pause to ride out a spike in virus transmission.

Health is as important as justice, and I'm writing this column to let you know what steps your local court is taking to keep jurors safe. To start, we have worked closely with our justice partners to streamline litigation and settle cases whenever possible. Here in Yolo, we are fortunate to have strong and cooperative relationships with our jury trial justice partners, including the District Attorney, the Public Defender, conflicts counsel, and the private bar, represented by the Yolo County Bar Association. All are committed to settling cases when possible, to avoid the need to summon jurors.

But not every case can settle, and so the Court has taken a number of precautions to reduce the risk of virus transmission at the courthouse. We have a mask requirement, enforced throughout the courthouse. We have social distancing rules, applicable to the jury assembly room and each courtroom. We have a modern and spacious courthouse, with high-capacity ventilation systems. And we have judges and staff committed to keeping our jurors safe *and* keeping the wheels of justice moving.

The pandemic also brought us a new innovation in jury service: remote appearance for hardship screening. So when you receive a jury summons, you will first appear by Zoom in a “virtual courtroom” for initial screening. This saves a trip to the courthouse, and avoids the public health risk of a packed jury assembly room. (But no one is required to appear remotely – you can always appear in person if you like).

Jury service is an important act of public service; indeed, it’s the closest thing we have to direct democracy, and it is a bedrock aspect of our justice system. It can’t stop during a pandemic, but the Yolo Superior Court and our justice partners are committed to making the experience as safe and efficient as possible.

Daniel Maguire is Presiding Judge of the Yolo Superior Court.